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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a transcript of a videotaped roundtable discussion on learning disabilities among people in adult literacy programs in Canada. Panelists discussed several definitions of learning disabilities, such as processing difficulties, physical difficulties, and receptive difficulties. They debated the usefulness of labeling persons with learning disabilities and whether such labels would discourage volunteer tutors and prevent them from working effectively with students. On the other hand, however, panelists pointed out that an interview-type assessment process is particularly helpful in discovering the strengths and weaknesses of adult learners when they enter a program. The information gained in such interviews should be passed along to the tutors so that they can adapt their teaching strategies to individual learning styles and needs. Access for tutors to resource persons who are more experienced and trained in learning disabilities was proposed. (KC)

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ED 383 909

LEARNING DISABILITIES IN ADULT LITERACY

Roundtable

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Literacy Branch
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June, 1991

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Tracy Odell

Welcome to our discussion on learning disabilities. This video will be exploring some of the issues around learning...[break]...philosophy for your own program and how relevant the issue of learning disability is for your practice.

Here to discuss this topic with us today is Pat Hatt from the North York Board of Education. Guy Ewing from a community based literacy program, Parkdale Project Read. Charles Craig from the Craig Reading and Educational Services. Charles has been working privately in the field since 1972 and his organization provides individualized programs to adults with special learning needs. And, Robin Millar who is an adult learning specialist for the Manitoba Literacy Office at the Department of Education.

So, to start things rolling, let's just clarify what we're all talking about when we talk about learning disabilities. Pat, would you like to start?

Pat Hatt

Well, I think learning disabilities, one could say, is an information processing disability. I believe it exists, that it's real in the sense that it isn't something manufactured by poor teaching, or by lack of interest, or emotional problems. That, it's there but that it doesn't mean that you have to...that it necessarily limits what you can do just, perhaps, how you can do it.

Tracey O'Dell

How does that fit into everyone else's definition of learning disability?

Guy Ewing

I like the way you've described it. Just from, you know, my own limited experience with people who are having difficulties with reading and writing, it seems to me that there's something a little wrong with the term. I don't think the term, learning disabilities, quite fits what you've described. I don't, in my experience, I can't see people having difficulty with learning so much as perceiving and processing, as you say.

I think people have a wonderful capacity to learn and I think that the difficulty comes in that there is a kind of "noise" that gets in the way with people's learning. That's how, looking at it from the outside, when somebody's learning, it seems like there's "noise" getting in the way. So, I like very much the way you've described it.

Robin Millar

Yeah, I think I'd generally agree with that and often the confusion in the field, it seems to me, is that learning disabilities has become a sort of catch-all phrase for a lot of learning problems, or learning difficulties, in individuals histories and confusions on the part of learners who have either been...arrived

at their own definition that they have some sort of disability. Or, they have genuine physical disabilities, or they have confusing learning problems that nobody has sorted out at somewhere along the way.

That, I think, is an unfortunate kind of vagueness that exists not so much on the part of experienced educators, like yourselves but, the public. Then, very often, learners who've been through a system and somehow, at some time, either labelled themselves or have been labelled, or have been mis-labelled at some point and that leaves them with a confusion about what that means. That's where, in literacy, I think that's the real issue for practitioners is what do you do about that when you get that sort of learner coming forward with that profile.

Charles Craig

The kind of...sort of fitting into and around with all these definitions. I tend to agree with Robin, in a sense, that a lot of the things, I think, get sort of mis-identified and coming back, perhaps, to what you were saying there, Guy, there's "noise" and interference but sometimes that noise can be circumvented. You can go around it.

What we may identify as a learning disability is just simply an area that is a particular problem to an individual where, in other ways, it can be found. So, is that really a learning disability or is it just simply...the person can still learn, but using that particular mode, or that particular way, they're going to have difficulty with it. So, you may find another way to get around that...to work around.

I think we tend to, sort of, what you were saying there, Robin, tend to lump everything in together. Then people say, "Well, I'm learning disabled", simply because they have a particular mode or, one particular mode, is of difficulty to them. So, they're saying, "Well, I'm learning disabled". You could say, "Well, not necessarily because, you know, you can learn perfectly well. It's just that in that particular way, you're going to have trouble learning in that way, in that manner".

Pat Hatt

I have a little problem with that sort of thing mainly because I think often what people have had in the past...have done in the past and, because of the whole problem around labelling and the negative implications of labelling, that people are often reluctant to put a label on somebody because they don't respect the persons ability to come to terms with what that means. I think that is something that we really have to watch.

I've always worried when people in literacy programs say, "I don't want to use that label. We won't talk about it". But, what happens is that people then don't come to terms with the fact that I have a limitation in an area, perhaps, but that doesn't mean that I can't do what I want. I just do it differently.

I think that, often, when you meet people who say I have a learning disability and they use that as the reason why they will never do anything or, nothing can be done, then that's negative. But, that's not the problem with the learning disability, or the term. The problem is with the fact that nobody's explained

the term.

Charles Craig

I would still tend to part company there a little bit because I think that we tend to be very quick...and I'm not afraid to use the label, but I think we have to be a little more selective in how it's used. I think sometimes we tend to use...for example, if a person reverses when they're reading, or they lose their place, or something. Is that, necessarily, something that's severe enough to be called a learning disability? Yet, it tends to be labelled that. It may be simply an eye functioning problem or something fairly straight forward that is a mechanical kind of difficulty which isn't, by my definition, sort of a processing problem, it's a receptive problem and something that can be dealt with.

If it's at that level and not necessarily a processing problem, I would tend not to call it "L.D." I would tend to stay away from that label and call it what it is which is something that I can deal with on another level completely.

Tracey O'Dell

Can you just explain a bit what you see as the difference between a processing problem or mechanical problem?

Charles Craig

Well, a receptive problem is simply if the person is not perceiving the information correctly because they're losing place. So, they're not able to get the print...the image of the print to the brain, in effect, because they're losing place. That, to me, is a receptive problem. They're not getting it to the processing level.

Robin Millar

Well, perhaps, to even take that further, I think there is...that practitioners especially need to be quite clear that a learner who presents with some apparent difficulties, could actually have an acuity problem. They could have something wrong with their eyes. They could have something wrong with their ears that is actually identifiably physical. They might need glasses, they might need some correction, they might need hearing aids, or whatever. Those sorts of things are physiological and I'm concerned with those kinds of brain processing problems.

Although, my experience of working with adult learners is that they might have had some eye problems processing, some inner ear disturbances as youngsters, and as a consequence of that, are left with some sort of processing confusions. Therefore, as adults, they have a learning style that is severely limited to access those kinds of routes you were talking about.

Guy Ewing

For me, the use of the term physical, you know, problem clarifies things a lot. What I was really talking about originally was that with some learners, and certainly not most adult literacy learners, there seem to be particularly

difficult physical things getting in the way and creating this "noise". It's hard for me, actually, to make a distinction between a physical problem like eyesight, or hearing, and a so-called brain processing problem.

I don't think we understand enough about brain processes to really talk too much about that. I think that if someone has a really different way of processing something, I can't really see any way of understanding that except to think that, perhaps, there is some kind of physical...this person is facing some difficult physical sorts of things.

Charles Craig

I'm just trying to make the point that I'm not denying the existence of learning disabilities but, I think, that we...what I'm concerned about is that any...what I refer to as learning difficulty, can get labelled as a learning disability. It's a learning difficulty. Often, in ways, it can be fought. It can be worked out to work around it. To teach around it. It's there. It's real. I'm not denying that. But, if you're working around it, if you can find a way of dealing with it...and the people I would consider to be extremely learning disabled are people that I have not been able to find a way around.

So, this is just a personal kind of way that I'm defining it and dealing with it. The reason that I'm taking that approach is that, so often, we kind of throw up our hands and say, "They've got a learning disability - I can't teach them".

The point I'm trying to make is that these things, maybe they are disabilities, maybe they are processing problems, maybe they're at an earlier level - a receptive level. But, if we take the attitude that there are ways a person can learn, a person is a capable learner - they're competent - we will find ways to work with them. But, I've found, often, people will come to me and they'll say, "Well, I'm learning disabled so, I can't learn". Then, for that reason, I'd like to sort of stay away from that label as much as I can to the point of saying, "Yes, you've got learning difficulties, maybe there is a particular problem, but let's find a way around it".

Tracy Odell

How important is it for a community based literacy program to know this about learners? To know if the person has some kind of learning disability, or a particular learning style, or whatever term they might be using? But, how important is it to know that about a learner, in terms of, having success in teaching the person to read and write as an adult?

Charles Craig

Can I turn it around and say, "Well, how can you possibly teach them if you don't know how they're learning"? You know, you have to...

Robin Millar

I don't think it's so important that they know that about the learner. What the

practitioner needs to know is the range of information about good teaching practice. How people learn from both the range of learning styles and strategies. Also, what teaching strategies are applicable in a wide range of ways?

I think what's often happened to those learners in schools where, for example, think they couldn't read, their memory of school was that they were taught in one methodology. Then, they believe that in order to be a great reader, or a writer, you have to be able to access it via that methodology.

So, for practitioners...it's not so much from my stand-point...I think it's helpful if they understand that, they are learners that are going to have unique learning styles. They're sort of a bit out of that range that you were talking about. But, what's more important is that they have a real, solid basis of good teaching strategies.

I mean, in the end, when I'm done training people, they've said, "Well, what you're telling us to do is just good teaching". And, I say, "Yes, true"! And how many people do it? In the end, there are a lot of people that keep backing up to how they believed they were taught, or what worked for them, or what they feel comfortable with, rather than exploring the range that you were talking about earlier.

Charles Craig

I think we said the same things, but in different ways.

Robin Millar

Yes.

Guy Ewing

Can I just add one thing to that list of things that teachers need? It is, how to find out how people learn. They need strategies for finding that out. The danger of...say, okay, this person has an auditory processing problem, is that you then might be tempted to design a whole series of exercises that we just spoke about - precisely the thing that is preventing that person from reading. They are just wasting their time doing something which they physically, you know, have difficulty doing.

Robin Millar

Well, that can still mean that you would teach to their weaknesses.

Guy Ewing

Exactly. No, I'm agreeing with you.

Pat Hatt

That's the thing that people often do. They say, "Okay, you can't learn that, I'll teach it". With students who may not have any problems, they'll say, "Oh well, you don't know this, let's learn it".

Tracy Odell

How should they be accessing that? How do they know when they're at that point? Should they be the ones with the expertise, or should they be calling on someone else?

Charles Craig

Well, I think, you know, it's asking a lot of a tutor, I think, at least at the beginning of their time, to be able to do this. This would apply...like, I hire trained teachers in my program who supposedly have a background of knowledge. But, they also need, getting back to what Pat's saying, they need that support and back-up.

So often, the level of knowledge that you say they need, Robin, I would agree with. They do need that level of knowledge. But, that comes with time and training and it doesn't come in one training session and it doesn't...it's an accumulative kind of thing. You need that to be able to figure out where that individual is.

So often, just, what Pat's saying, the idea of the on-going support is the critical thing. Something where someone can be there, when a small issue comes up, that's relative at that moment, that's learned by the tutor.

In other words, it's, again, not trying to lay out a massive program for a tutor but, slowly working it through. So, you're back to the issue of having to have knowledgeable support available that can help that...

Robin Millar

I agree. I think that community based programs need access to some...as you say, somebody with greater, wider expertise perhaps, because a lot of them especially, volunteer tutors, have only worked with one person, maybe, two people...very limited experience in teaching and are just in the process of being trained themselves. So, we can't expect them to have that wide range of experience and learning of themselves about themselves about the process.

So, I mean, that kind of...what you were raising is, what do community based programs need? I think it's not fair to expect that individual tutors will be able to have all that kind of expertise. But, they do need some back-up.

Guy Ewing

I think it's a very delicate balance that tutors, as you've been saying, really do need a lot of support and clarity about how to help, and that sort of thing, as a resource. It's just a matter of trying to balance it so that...tutors, also, need to feel that they can find the answers because, actually, they are the most likely person to really find out how that particular person learns. So, they need support for that, too.

So, it has to be a situation where people are getting support without being disempowered to actually do the investigation. It has to be done on a very individual basis.

Pat Hatt

I think that's why...well, there are some places where you need a specialized person if a person's problem is severe and somebody has the money to pay for it. But, if you don't have that, you know, you're working with people...and to take them away from the tutor to put them with a specialist, that doesn't work.

So, what you have to do is that you have to help the tutor be able to do it. It may be, as I do, it gives...says, "Here's where, I think, the problem lies. That's what the learner says that he thinks, or she thinks, this where the problem is. This is why...the sorts of things I think they should do. Why don't the two of you work out ways in which you can do that"? So, that way, you get both people growing.

Robin Millar

My feeling is that, and it goes back to...even if they could afford to get assessed, which is usually exorbitant in any case, would that assessment tell them much more about how they learn?...tell them what they really need to know, or want to know?

I mean...that old joke about, I sent them to the educational psychologist because, you know, he didn't know how to read and the educational psychologist came back, having spent two weeks with him, and the end result is that the educational psychologist said that he didn't know how to read - which, I already knew.

Pat Hatt

It was confirmed.

Robin Millar

Yeah, it was confirmed. So, the issue of formal assessment, in those senses of...I don't feel are particularly necessary, unless there were certain specific circumstances around it.

Pat Hatt

I've been talking to psychologists more and more around...who are beginning to expect that the interview assessment is, in fact, a better way than the, sort of, mechanistic test assessment. Those assessments may, in the future, be of value if they deal with the issue.

I know in the area of employment, we've always advocated for assessments which would give information on obtaining and maintaining employment. Not on how well you interact with your wife.

Tracy Odell

As far as someone in a community based program. When a new learner approaches the program for help with reading and writing, do you feel that it's very important to know right off the bat if the person has a learning disability?

Guy Ewing

I think in our program, we would prefer not to have any kind of categorization of the person, at all. The reason for that is, that the only consequences that we've actually seen of people being categorized, are negative. We haven't ever had the experience of it being a positive thing. I don't think that means that it never is a positive thing for a person to be diagnosed as disabled, but in all the cases...the specific cases we've had, that's been a very negative thing. It's made people feel that they can't learn, that they're stupid. People who can't read or write already feel stupid enough without being told that there's some reason, more than all of the other reasons that other people face, that they can't learn to read and write.

So, on one level, I can appreciate the importance of recognizing, for a person who has a real "noise" - to use that term, again - for that to be recognized both by the person and the person that he, or she, is working with as a tutor.

As far as the term, learning disabled goes, just based on experience, it hasn't been useful. It seems better, to us, not to use it. To just work with that person as an individual. A whole new person who has to figure out anew, with a tutor or in a group, or something like that, how he, or she, learns.

Pat Hatt

Guy, would you say that those such things are intimidating to a tutor when people come with that kind of information? I have had people think, oh well, I couldn't possibly work with that person because I don't understand any of that.

I think that that's one of the negative factors of coming, or being sent with, a pre-determined assessment. Because, you are often intimidated by people who are quite able to work with people with learning disabilities say, "Oh, I couldn't possibly do that, I don't have the training".

Guy Ewing

It creates a lot of mystification, I think, for a tutor to be told that somebody is learning disabled because they say, "Oh my god, I need to do some special kind of psychological stuff with brain...you know, something...and they just...if you could say to a person, "Well, this person has this particular problem and here are some ideas about how to work with him that would be useful". But, to be told that...

Pat Hatt

I let them come back. Get to know them. And, he may, you know, the person who has a learning disability - or, often they say, dyslexia, - pass that on to the teacher. In that context, then, the two of them find out just how far they can go.

Robin Millar

But, I do think that people...one of the things that, I think, not just for a student with learning disabilities but all learners should go through some sort

of interview process when they're first coming into the program. Often times, due to shortage of staff, or trying to match tutors in their rush to match learners with tutors, that learners don't get interviewed to find out more about how they learn and something about their learning history and their perception of where they are at.

Some of those questions that you talked about, which aren't particularly assessments in a formal sense questions, but certainly understanding more about learning styles and how people might be suited to one another in terms of matching tutors and learners. That would be helpful for all intake and, I think, that there could be more care taken in some literacy programs about intake of learners. Because I know, just from people that I've talked to, some programs it's: I'm a learner. Well, I have the next person on the list to get a match, so you'll be together. That, to me, is pretty willy-nilly.

Charles Craig

From my perspective, that whole process is essential because, how can you plan a program for an individual if you don't do that? I mean, obviously you're developing an individualized program, at least I would assume, in any tutorial situation, you're developing one. So, you have to have that.

That interview, I think, should be conducted by your, what you use, the "master teacher" terminology. The person who has the broad range of experience to be able to do the matching with the tutor because that's critical both, in terms of, skill and personality. It's necessary. You have to develop a program. You have to have something for that person that is going to...at least, some initial ideas of approaches that may be helpful working with that individual.

Tracey Odell

What are some other teaching methods that are really helpful for working with people who have learning disabilities?

Pat Hatt

I think finding out what their open channels are. I think, I guess, it's obvious, but...we were talking before about the problem of teaching to deaf mutes. You've got to give, perhaps, tutors permission to stop using phonics because they believe that if you can't sound it out, you can't read. You say, "Why don't we just forget that for awhile and really look at getting enough words, sight words, into the vocabulary. Enough exposure. So then, maybe later on, we can all go back to this".

I think that finding out what works, asking the person...I mean, I don't know how many people have asked, "How do you think you learn to read. Who were the best teachers"? And, they'll say, "Well, if I can sound them out, and just, I want to...but I could never do it". Well, then, use that. I mean teachers are...when people still want to fix what's wrong, as opposed to, use what's right.

Charles Craig

I think I would agree, really, that's the issue. You used the word "open

channel". Find the method that works would be the way I would express it. It's the same thing. Find out what works. If a person can't hold focus - fine. Then we know phonics isn't going to be a very effective method. We may look for corrective lenses which may help, in some cases. It may not in others. I mean, there are various things you do that you work back through.

Tracey Odell

So, as a wrap up then, I'd like to go around and just hear if you've got one piece of advice for people in literacy programs about working with people who have learning disabilities. Robin, maybe you'd like to...

Robin Millar

Well, I think, to pick up where Charles' last point was, I think, the most effective thing that tutors can do is, learn how they learn themselves. The more insight they get in...because that's what you can really do best, is to figure out how you learn. Then, from that, by looking at the range of...starting from that point, where do I fit in the whole range of how people learn and learning styles and this whole issue of learning how to learn? What works for me, what things have been easy, what things have been difficult in my own learning? They can begin to grab, with a lot of confidence, about at least, their own learning style. Then, when they begin to raise that, about just general learning style of all learners, not just those difficulties, they then will have a lot more confidence and strength about that to deal with the learner and the compare and say, "Yeah, I do that, too. Or, I do that differently". So, I think, learning what your own learning style is would be the first step.

Charles Craig

I would obviously agree with that and just, sort of, add that it's an on-going process. We keep learning about how we learn. The more we do, the more we're, sort of, interested in it and, I guess, reflecting on how we're learning and how somebody else is learning. Stop and think about it and just, sort of, try and analyze it a bit and not just, sort of, say, "Well, I'm not going to do this, that and the next thing" and to actually look at what the person is doing. See how they're making...discussing it with them, obviously, and use that comparison to talk about your own learning. That, sometimes, gives the other person insight. Because <u>they</u>, not only will <u>you</u> be saying, "This is something I do, too". It will be the other way around. They can gain some insight from that. That, I think, if we can start there, we can find those channels - find those ways that work for the individual. But, we've got to reflect. We've got to think about it.

Guy Ewing

I'd say it's important to recognize the difficulties that some people have in reading and writing. It's, also, important not to be intimidated by that and scared by it. You just have to be patient and trust yourself and get all the help you can get.

Pat Hatt

In supporting that, people shouldn't be frightened of people with learning

disabilities - tutors shouldn't. We're just normal people who just, unfortunately, process information differently than other people. We need help. It's an awful thing to have alone. It's not half as bad if you know other people who have it. But, not to be frightened and allow us to have a learning disability.

I think I have the right to be who I am and what I am. I think people with learning disabilities have that right. So, don't try to hide it or make them feel that they are, somehow, being embarrassed...it's embarrassing to be this, or something's wrong with having a disability. They have the ability to learn, maybe not the way that they had thought they would, or had hoped they would, but they have the ability. Together, they'll find it. They'll be successful. We don't have two heads. Just one that doesn't always work the way everybody else's does.

Tracey O'Dell

Well, we've heard different views on this video about the issues of learning disabilities. We've produced this video, hoping that it will inspire your own discussions in your own literacy programs and help you as you continue to consolidate your own philosophy.

I'd like to thank our panellists, today. Pat Hatt, from the North York Board of Education. Guy Ewing, Parkdale Project Read. Charles Craig, Craig Reading and Educational Services. And, Robin Millar from the Manitoba Literacy Office, Department of Education. Thank you, very much.

I'm Tracey O'Dell, from the Literacy Branch of the Ministry of Education.